

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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AMCONSUL BOMBAY
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AMCONSUL MADRAS
CINPAC

C O N F I D E N T I A L NEW DELHI 4895

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, IN
SUBJECT: STAKES ARE HIGH IN KARNAL BY-ELECTION

1. AS THE APRIL 2 POLLING DATE APPROACHES, ATTENTION IS INCREASINGLY BEING FOCUSSED ON THE ELECTION TO FILL A VACANT LOK SABHA SEAT FROM THE KARNAL CONSTITUENCY IN HARYANA, NORTH OF DELHI. BHAGWAT DAYAL SHARMA, THE JANATA CANDIDATE, WON THE SEAT LAST YEAR BY A LARGE MARGIN IN THE 1977 JANATA "WAVE." SHARMA HAS SINCE BEEN NAMED GOVERNOR OF ORISSA. ALTHOUGH THERE ARE SOME 22 CANDIDATES IN THE FRAY, THE CONTEST ESSENTIALLY COMES DOWN TO A RACE AMONG THE CANDIDATES OF THE JANATA, CONGRESS (I) AND OFFICIAL CONGRESS. PILOO MODY WAS ORIGINALLY IN LINE FOR THE JANATA NOMINATION, BUT LATER HAD

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TO WITHDRAW WHEN HARYANA CHIEF MINISTER ZEVI LAL INSISTED ON A LOCAL MAN OF HIS OWN CHOICE. THE JANATA CANDIDATE, MOHINDER SINGH LATHAR, IS A JAT AND IS THE SON-IN-LAW OF DEVI LAL'S ELDER BROTHER. THE CONGRESS (I) CANDIDATE, CHIRANJI LAL SHARMA, IS A BRAHMIN, AS IS THE OFFICIAL CONGRESS CANDIDATE, SHASHI BHUSHAN. (BHUSHAN IS THE FIERY, LEFTIST EX-MP

WHO WAS DEFEATED BY FOREIGN MINISTER VAJPAYEE IN THE NEW DELHI CONSTITUENCY IN THE 1977 LOK SABHA ELECTIONS.)

2. CASTE CONSIDERATIONS USUALLY PLAY A CONSIDERABLE ROLE IN HARYANA POLITICS AND, IN THE ABSENCE OF ANY DISCERNIBLE "WAVES" COMPARABLE TO THE 1977 PHENOMENON, THEY MAY BE A MAJOR FACTOR IN THIS BY-ELECTION. ALTHOUGH HARYANA IS A PRE-DOMINANTLY JAT STATE, THE KARNAL CONSTITUENCY IS UNUSUAL IN THAT THE JAT COMMUNITY COMPRISES ONLY ABOUT 15 PERCENT OF THE ELECTORATE. BRAHMINS, ON THE OTHER HAND, ARE A SIZEABLE PERCENTAGE OF THE VOTERS. OTHER MAJOR CASTE AND COMMUNITY GROUPS ARE RAJPUTS, HARIJANS, SIKHS AND NON-SIKH PUNJABI REFUGEES FROM PAKISTAN. HENCE, THE JANATA CANDIDATE'S MEMBERSHIP IN THE JAT COMMUNITY MAY NOT BE AN ASSET. LOCAL ISSUES, PARTICULARLY RISING PRICES FOR CERTAIN ESSENTIAL FOODSTUFFS AND THE DECLINING PRICES WHICH SUGAR-CANE GROWERS RECEIVE FOR THEIR PRODUCE, ARE REPORTED TO BE MAJOR FACTORS IN THE CAMPAIGN WHICH COULD WORK AGAINST THE JANATA NOMINEE. PRESS REPORTS INDICATE THAT FARMERS IN PARTICULAR ARE ANGRY OVER THE SUGAR-CANE ISSUE.

3. NATIONAL POLITICAL LEADERS ARE BECOMING INVOLVED IN THE FINAL DAYS OF THE CAMPAIGN IN THE REALIZATION THAT THE STAKES ARE HIGH IN KARNAL. MRS. GANDHI APPARENTLY DECIDED THAT HER CANDIDATE'S PROSPECTS WERE GOOD ENOUGH FOR HER TO PLACE HER REPUTATION ON THE LINE AND ACTIVELY CAMPAIGN FOR HIM. SHE
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WILL MAKE AN ELECTION SWING THROUGH KARNAL ON MARCH 30. JANATA IS ALSO BRINGING IN ITS BIG GUNS FOR THE HOME STRETCH: PRIME MINISTER DESAI, FOREIGN MINISTER VAJPAYEE AND INDUSTRIES MINISTER FERNANDES ARE AMONG THE GOI MINISTERS WHO ARE SCHEDULED TO CAMPAIGN FOR LATHAR IN THE NEXT SEVERAL DAYS.

OBSERVERS ARE CLOSELY WATCHING THE EXTENT TO WHICH JANATA'S CONSTITUENT ELEMENTS IN HARYANA WILL IGNORE THEIR SQUABBLING AND WORK TOGETHER TO WIN THE SEAT FOR LATHAR.

4. THE KARNAL BY-ELECTION RESULTS WILL BE CLOSELY WATCHED AS A BAROMETER OF JANATA'S POPULARITY IN ITS NORTHERN "HINDI BELT" STRONGHOLD. A LOSS BY LATHAR COULD NOT ONLY PRODUCE SERIOUS RIFTS WITHIN THE RULING PARTY, BUT COULD ALSO LEND SUBSTANCE TO MRS. GANDHI'S CONTENTION THAT THE JANATA HAS LOST ITS POPULAR MANDATE IN THE NORTH. THE JANATA'S MEDIOCRE PERFORMANCE IN THE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS IN THE SOUTH CAN BE PARTIALLY EXPLAINED AWAY; SUCH WOULD NOT BE THE CASE OF A DEFEAT IN HARYANA -- EVEN IF IT WERE DUE TO PARTICULAR LOCAL CONDITIONS AND TRADITIONAL CASTE CONSIDERATIONS. CONVERSELY, MRS. GANDHI OBVIOUSLY SEES THAT KARNAL BY-ELECTION AS AN IMPORTANT TESTING GROUND FOR THE PROGRESS OF HER "NORTHERN

STRATEGY" -- I.E., HER EFFORT TO REBUILD HER BASE AND HER IMAGE AMONG THE GROUPS IN THE NORTHERN HEARTLAND WHICH SHE HAD ALIENATED BY HER ACTIONS DURING THE EMERGENCY. A WIN OR EVEN A GOOD SHOWING BY HER NOMINEE WOULD CLEARLY PROVIDE IMPETUS TO HER OFFENSIVE AGAINST THE JANATA ON ITS OWN HOME TURF.

3. INTERPRETATION OF THE OUTCOME MAY BE SOMEWHAT CONFUSED GIVEN ALLEGATIONS ALREADY BEING MADE THAT THE JANATA GOVERNMENT IN HARYANA WILL USE FOUL PLAY TO ENSURE VICTORY FOR ITS CANDIDATE. A GENERAL SECRETARY OF THE OFFICIAL CONGRESS PARTY HAS TOLD US AND OTHERS (INCLUDING JANATA LEADERS) THAT HE HAS COME AWAY FROM FREQUENT VISITS TO KARNAL CONVINCED THAT THIS WILL BE THE CASE. SIMILAR ALLEGATIONS WERE MADE IN CONNECTION WITH THE KEY STATE ASSEMBLY BY-ELECTIONS IN CONFIDENTIAL

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DECEMBER INVOLVING THE JANATA CHIEF MINISTERS OF BIHAR AND U.P., BOTH OF WHOM WON MASSIVE VICTORIES.
GOHEEN

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